

MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICTS IN UNIVERSITIES: THE UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA NSUKKA, EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is inevitable in any given organisation; the Universities as centres of ideas, experimentation, and diversity of philosophies, ethnicities, and beliefs are not immune to conflicts. In the University system, certain conflicts may have negative consequences, including disruption in academic programmes. Thus, the need to adopt effective management approaches to conflicts. The University of Nigeria has witnessed some conflicts through the years, but have adopted some innovative approaches in curbing the conflict. The study, sought to: examine the different conflict management approaches employed by the University of Nigeria in restoring peace in Enugu campus in 2016, determine the effect of mixed conflict management approaches employed by University of Nigeria Enugu on the effectiveness of the resolution strategy, and evaluate the extent to which the committee recommendations have been implemented to forestall such conflict in the future. The study adopted the survey design with a population of thirty-seven (37) ad-hoc panel members of enquiry on student conflict in 2016 at Enugu Campus of the University of Nigeria which was purposely selected and considered to be the sample. Primary data was sourced through the administration of a structured questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha which gave $r=0.89$ indicating a high degree of item consistency. The opinion of experts was sought to ensure face and content validity of the research instrument. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as tables, frequencies, and percentages while the hypotheses were tested with ordinal logistic regression using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.20). The study concludes that the school management would do better by adopting proactive preventive measures against conflict occurrence. However, if conflicts occur, there is a need to adopt a win-win strategy. It is recommended that in the university setting, the high handed winner takes all approach to conflict resolution would not work and may merely escalate the conflict.

Keywords: Conflict; Conflict Resolution; Management; University; Students

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1. INTRODUCTION

The university as a system comprises different units as well as different individuals with different interests, skills, talents, aspirations, visions, and missions [1], as centres of ideas and knowledge the activities that take place in a university constitute driving forces for conflict [2]. The reason for the above is borne out of the fact that everybody in a given system pursues the organisational goals as well as personal goals. Higher institutions that are truly free are recognised by debate and dissent, and these features are the lifeblood of such institutions, so it is probably inevitable that such events will continue to occur from time to time [3]. Peaceful resolution of conflicts enables organisations' employees as well as employers to work together to achieve organisational objectives.

The conflict management approach an organisation adopts goes a long way in determining the extent to which such an organisation navigates the daily conflict areas in the organisation. As has been rightly pointed out by Yusuf & Anuar [4], it is in the process of accomplishing the goals of the organisation that the objectives of individuals are met.

Although, it is on that premise that conflict management has attracted attention in recent times as a result of benefits derivable from such organisational conflict resolution.

Since the 1970s, cases of university conflict have been a recurring decimal in the annals of Nigerian university system [5]. Numerous studies have been conducted on the causes of conflict in the university education system. Among the common causes of crisis found are infrastructure deficit, inadequate feeding and accommodation among students, youthful exuberance [6, 7]. Others include personnel crisis, cult activities, power outage, increase in school fees, and high handedness by university authorities, removal of oil subsidy at a time, and refusal to yield to students' demand in different institutions [8]. In their study of 2016 crisis in the University of Port Harcourt, Vincent, Okon & Njoku [9] found that the absence of dialogue and inexperience of corporate communications operational dynamics fueled the conflict. In another study, of conflicts in university for development studies (UDS) from 1999 to 2009, Akparep [10] identified wide communication gap between students and the school management, delay in meeting students' demand by the school management, failure by the school management to guarantee the security of lives and properties, inadequate facilities such as lecture rooms, laboratories and equipment as the major causes of the conflict. Others causes were: Students being forced to pay special fees/hikes in students' fees, the activities of campus secret cults and differences in perception of group and organisational objectives.

On the strategies of resolving conflicts, Ikoku [11] suggests that one way to deal with student unrest is for the Government to improve the funding of tertiary institutions to take care of many of their challenges. Ikeda, Oliviera & Campomar [12] found as cited in [13] that conflicts are part of human nature and that the prevailing means of managing it among people in the service sector in Nigeria include: bargaining, collaboration and avoidance conflict management styles. Many other scholars have identified different conflict management strategies being used in organisations. Fatile & Adejuwon [14] examine conflict and conflict management in higher institutions of learning with specific reference to Nigerian Universities and found that maintaining a cordial relationship between students and school authorities and

involving students in decision making (collaboration) process in school appeared to be the most effective strategies for resolving the crisis in tertiary institutions.

Akparep [10] advocates the promotion of fundamental human rights, freedom, and fair allocation of values, equity and justice as strategies that leaders, management and all in positions of authority can promote. These values are essential to reducing friction and conflicts in an organisation. Hodge & Anthony [15] in their study of organisational theory identified conflict management strategies as suppression, smoothing, avoiding, compromise, thirdparty intervention, cooperation, democratic process, job rotation as well as confrontation. Likewise, Oyebade [16] identified certain strategies as important in resolving conflict. Other previous research endeavours are found in the extant literature on the modes of resolving conflict; [16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24].

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

One theory that prompted research in approaches to conflict resolution was the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode theory propounded in the University of Pittsburgh in the USA. This theory seems logical as it helps scholars chart a theoretical territory that surrounds conflict-handling modes, thus recognising two parts in choosing a course of action in a conflict situation: assertiveness and cooperativeness [25]. Assertiveness has to do with the extent to which one tries to satisfy his/her interest or needs while cooperativeness is making an effort to satisfy the other party's concerns [25]. The application of the theory is that the objectives of parties to a conflict are different and realising such objectives individually and to the satisfaction of parties through knowledge of such cause of dissatisfaction or seeking other peoples' cooperation when possessing valid information with respect to the dynamics of the conflict is key to resolution.

The criticism of the theory borders on its two-pronged limited options (assertiveness and cooperativeness) that discount one's peculiar cultural orientation. There is another criticism of "social desirability bias" a phenomenon in testing in which test-takers answer questions dishonestly. Besides, the Thomas Kilmann theory is blind to the impact of stress. The idea that human beings function in a steady-state is an assumption that is out of date.

Another theory that drives this study is social exchange theory. This theory is a joint effort of different scholars who have carried out studies on psychology, social psychology and sociology in John Hopkins University in the USA. The scholars whose works jointly account for this theory are Blau [26]; Homans [27]; Thibaut & Kelley [28]. The theory asserts that when there is a relationship between two or more individuals or groups in any social interaction, there is a reciprocal exchange of material and non-material resources between two parties based on trust in which both parties perceive responsibilities to each other. Its central principle is that people in a social relationship determine whether to continue or terminate the relationship based on the comparison of rewards received in the relationship to costs incurred for maintaining the relationship. In other words, the social exchange theory postulates that people weigh the potential benefits and risks and then seek to maximise benefits and minimise costs. This implies that people create and keep those relationships that increase or maximise their rewards and minimise costs.

One assumption of the theory is that people behave rationally when it comes to deciding on rewards and punishments and that the gratifications we get among human beings come mostly from others. There is also the presumption of having full knowledge of social, psychological and economic aspects of their behaviour. It operates within cultural norms, while social credit is preferred to social indebtedness. The application of the theory to this study is that when two groups (management staff and students of universities) renege in their responsibility to the extent that the rewards of one or both are hampered with respect to the relationship, the conflict will occur. On the other hand, if the objectives of the parties are achieved, they will be more

committed to the sustenance of the relationship. The weakness of the theory is that it does not recognise the role of emotion in decision making and always presume that individuals always make rational decisions.

When communication among parties to a relationship improves, it will give rise to the accommodation of perspectives and understanding of positions. This situation raises the trust in that relationship which ultimately leads to more commitment to the relationship, thereby restraining conflict to the barest minimum.

Social dependence creates an atmosphere of collaboration, and when the parties are on the same page; their trust is improved, leading to more commitment in the relationship.

Opportunistic behaviour happens when a party in a relationship takes undue advantage in which the other partner is worse-off. This leads to unhealthy competition and dissatisfaction in the relationship. This results in the propensity to leave the relationship.

When there is financial dependence in a relationship, it creates an atmosphere of compromise which gives room for trust and commitment.

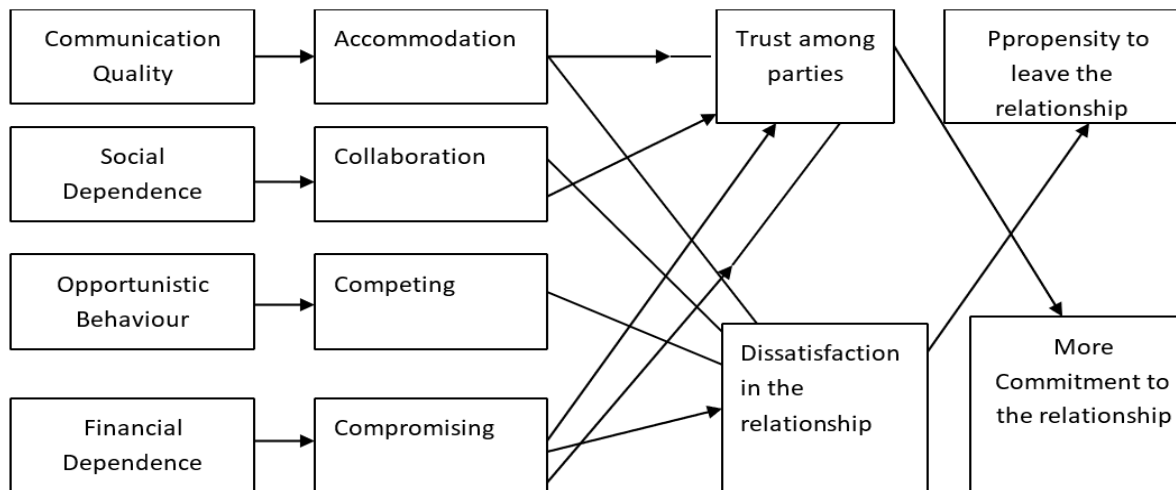


Figure 1 Adapted from Thomas-Kilmann (1988) and Miyoung & Haemoon (2017)

2.1. The Electric Power Outage Related Students-Management Conflict in the University of Nigeria Enugu Campus 2016

One of the Nigerian biggest business challenges is the erratic power supply. In one study, about 83% of all managers surveyed considered electricity outages to be a serious problem [29]. Furthermore, organisations in states and sectors in Nigeria report average power outages of eight hours per day; and no equivalent country undergoes such severe losses related to the power supply, as Nigeria [30]. Besides, on the ease of getting electricity, Nigeria was ranked 187 of 189 countries in 2015 [31]. With 45% electrification rate and poor maintenance culture in Nigeria, the primary reasons for the negative development of electricity supply in Nigeria are established [29].

In the case of the University of Nigeria Enugu campus, the problem was brought to the fore with the reduction in the number of hours of power provided by the generating sets of the university to the University community from four hours per day to two and a half hours. There was no supply from the public power supply agency to complement the reduction.

The period coincided with the preparation period for the 2016 first semester examinations and other professional examinations in the school. Worried by the power outage challenge, the students started complaining loudly by locking classrooms, held initial ‘peaceful protest’. When

the solution was not fast in coming, meetings that the university tried to hold with some student leaders were disrupted, and over time this degenerated into a riot. The invitation of the police to quell the riot forestalled escalation. Before this, the rioters had destroyed properties worth about forty (40) million naira. Consequently, an ad-hoc committee of inquiry was set up by the University Management to find both the remote and immediate causes of the conflict.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

4. RESULTS

- What conflict resolution approaches were used to restore peace following the power outage related conflict in the university?
- How effective were the approaches in the management/resolution of the conflict?
- To what extent were the panel's report recommendation implemented on campus.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the survey design. The population consists of thirty-seven (37) adhoc panel members of enquiry on student conflict in 2016 at Enugu Campus of University of Nigeria, which was purposely selected and considered to be the sample. Primary and secondary data were utilised. Secondary data were obtained from, books, journals, conflict panel report, and internet while primary data was sourced through the administration of a structured questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale. The opinion of experts was sought to ensure face and content validity of the research instrument. A test-re-test method of reliability was adopted for the study; thus, three copies of the questionnaire were distributed to members of the enquiry panel. The same number of the instrument was re-administered for the second time after two weeks, and the outcome was subjected to consistency test using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient testing tool. The reliability test yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.89, indicating a high degree of item consistency. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as tables, frequencies, and percentages while the hypotheses were tested with ordinal logistic regression using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.20).

Objective 1: To examine the conflict resolution approaches used to restore peace on campus.

Table 1 Analysis of respondents' responses to the conflict resolution approaches used to restore peace on campus.

S/N	Statements	SA	A	U	SD	D	Total (%)
(i)	The police were dispatched to the scene of the conflict, and students were ordered to vacate the campus (competing).	21 (57%)	15 (40%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)
(ii)	An ad-hoc platform was set up by the school management to investigate the remote and immediate causes of the conflict (collaborating).	28 (76%)	9 (24%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)
(iii)	The students paid reparation fee for damages incurred during the faceoff and signed good conduct undertaking (compromising).	19 (51%)	18 (49%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)
(iv)	The basic demands of the students were adequately addressed by the school authority (accommodating).	10 (27%)	17 (46%)	1 (3%)	3 (8%)	6 (16%)	37 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

The responses obtained from the statements made to examine the conflict resolution approaches used to restore peace on campus as contained (Table 1) shows that thirty-six respondents representing (97%) accept that the police were dispatched to the scene of the conflict and students were ordered to vacate the campus (competing), one respondent representing (3%) was undecided while no (0%) respondents disagree with the statement. On the other hand, thirty-seven respondents representing (100%) accepted that an ad-hoc platform was set up by the school management to investigate the remote and immediate causes of the conflict (collaborating) leaving no room for contrary opinion. Furthermore, the results also show that twenty-seven respondents representing (100%) agreed that the students paid reparation fee for damages incurred during the face-off and signed good conduct undertaking (compromising), thus, there was no disagreement. Lastly, twenty-seven respondents (73%) concurred that the school authority adequately addressed the basic demands of the students (accommodating), one respondent constituting (3%) was undecided while nine respondents representing (24%) disagreed with the statement. Inductively, it is evident that competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating are approaches used by the school management to restore peace on campus.

Table 2 Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (1)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	Df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [RESAPPRO= 9]	2.584	11.701	1.113	4	.000	2.584	3.608
Location [Competing = 22]	0.701	9.118	0.529	4	.004	0.701	1.534
[Collaborating = 5]	0.982	8.445	0.731	4	.000	0.982	1.803
[Compromising = 34]	0.512	5.781	0.465	4	.011	0.512	1.369
[Accommodating = 6]	0.389	3.865	0.306	4	.021	0.389	0.997

Link function: Logit.

*RESAPPRO = Resolution Approach

The ordinal logistic regression result (Table 2) indicates that competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating are approaches used by the school management to restore peace on campus with an increase in the probability of increased peace at an odds ratio of 0.701, 0.982, 0.512, 0.389 (95%

CI, 0.701 - 1.534, 0.982 – 1.803, 0.512 – 1.369, 0.389 – 0.997), Wald χ^2 (1) = 0.529, 0.731, 0.465, 0.306; $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.004, 0.000, 0.011$ and 0.021). Therefore, the alternate hypothesis which states that competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating are approaches used by the school management to restore peace on campus is hereby accepted and the null hypothesis rejected.

Objective 2: To determine the effectiveness level of mixed approaches in the management/resolution of conflict.

Table 3 Analysis of respondents' responses to the effectiveness level of mixed approaches in the resolution of conflict.

S/N	Statements	SA	A	U	SD	D	Total (%)
(i)	The order to students from the school authority to vacate the university campus helped to quell further escalation of the conflict.	12 (32%)	14 (38%)	3 (8%)	3 (8%)	5 (14%)	37 (100%)
(ii)	The outcome of the ad-hoc committee report sufficiently addressed the remote and immediate causes of the rift.	10 (27%)	17 (46%)	1 (3%)	2 (5%)	7 (19%)	37 (100%)
(iii)	The introduction of reparation fee has changed students' viewpoint on the destruction of public property.	15 (40%)	13 (35%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	8 (22%)	37 (100%)
(iv)	The school management has increased its level of responsibility on campus and strives to meet students needs promptly.	11 (30%)	18 (49%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	6 (16%)	37 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, 2019

H₁: Competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating are approaches used by the school management to restore peace on campus

The responses obtained from the statements made to determine the effectiveness level of mixed approaches in the management/resolution of conflict (Table 3) shows that twenty-six respondents representing (70%) accepted that the order to students from the school authority to vacate the university campus helped to quell further escalation of the conflict, three respondents representing (8%) were undecided while eight respondents representing (22%) disagreed.

Also, twenty-seven respondents representing (73%) agreed that the outcome of the ad-hoc committee report sufficiently addressed the remote and immediate causes of the rift; one respondent (3%) was undecided while nine respondents (24%) disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, twenty-eight respondents representing (75%) agreed that the introduction of reparation fee had changed students' viewpoint on the destruction of public property; none was undecided while nine respondents representing (25%) disagreed. Finally, twenty-nine respondents (79%) affirmed that the school management has increased its level of responsibility on campus and strives to meet student's needs promptly while eight respondents (21%) disagree with the statement. Remarkably, these results demonstrate the high effectiveness of the mixed (innovative win-win) approach in resolving or managing conflicts.

The ordinal regression result (Table 4) reveals that utilisation of mixed approach as a conflict resolution strategy has a positive and significant effect on the effectiveness with an increase in the probability of increased effectiveness at an odds ratio of 2.437 (95% CI, 2.437 – 2.913), Wald $\chi^2(1) = 1.654$, $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.007$). Therefore, the alternate hypothesis which states that utilisation of mixed approach as a conflict resolution strategy has a positive and significant effect on effectiveness is hereby accepted, and the null hypothesis rejected.

H₂: Utilisation of mixed approach as a conflict resolution strategy has a positive and significant effect on effectiveness.

Table 4 Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (2)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [EffLevel = 10]	2.672	1.131	1.219	1	.003	2.672	3.140
Location [MixApproach = 27]	2.437	7.862	1.654	1	.007	2.437	2.913

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Link function: Logit.

*PanRecom = Panel Report Recommendation

The responses obtained from the statements made to evaluate the extent to which the panel/committee report recommendations were implemented on campus (Table 5) indicates that thirty-two respondents representing (87%) accepted that two power generating sets were provided by the school management before the return of the students on campus, three respondents representing (8%) were undecided while two respondents representing (5%) disagreed. Similarly, a majority involving twenty-three respondents representing (71%) agreed that the supply of electric power and water from public and private channels has reasonably increased on campus. However, three respondents (6%) were undecided while eleven respondents (23%) disagreed with the claim about electricity and water supply improvements. Furthermore, twenty-two respondents representing (60%) agreed that internet and streetlighting connectivity had improved considerably on campus, two respondents (5%) were undecided while thirteen respondents (26%) disagreed. Lastly, thirty-seven respondents (100%) affirmed that there was total compliance on reparation fee payment and good conduct undertaking agreement by the students. Thus, there is convincing evidence that the panel/committee report recommendations were substantially implemented on campus.

Objective 3: To evaluate the extent to which the panel/committee report recommendations were implemented on campus.

Table 5 Analysis of respondents' responses on the extent to which the panel/committee report recommendations were implemented on campus

S/N	Statements	SA	A	U	SD	D	Total (%)
(i)	Two power generating sets were provided by the school management before the return of the students on campus.	14 (38%)	18 (49%)	3 (8%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	37 (100%)
(ii)	Supply of electric power and water from public and private channels has reasonably increased on campus.	13 (28%)	20 (43%)	3 (6%)	4 (8%)	7 (15%)	37 (100%)
(iii)	Internet and street-lighting connectivity have improved considerably on campus.	11 (30%)	11 (30%)	2 (5%)	5 (13%)	8 (22%)	37 (100%)
(iv)	There was total compliance on reparation fee payment and good conduct undertaking agreement by the students.	15 (41%)	22 (59%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	37 (100%)

Link function: Logit.

*PanRecom = Panel Report Recommendation

The ordinal regression result (Table 6) shows that the panel/committee report recommendations (win-win approach involving collaborating and accommodating strategies) were significantly implemented with an increase in the probability of increased implementation at an odds ratio of 2.912 (95% CI, 2.912 – 3.211), Wald $\chi^2(1) = 1.836$, $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.000$). Therefore, the alternate hypothesis which states that the panel/committee report recommendations (win-win approach involving collaborating and accommodating strategies) were significantly implemented is hereby accepted, and the null hypothesis rejected.

H₃: The panel/committee report recommendations (win-win approach involving collaborating and accommodating strategies) were significantly implemented

Table 6 Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (3)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [Implementation = 16]	2.735	1.131	1.304	1	.001	2.735	3.107
Location [PanRecom = 13]	2.912	5.781	1.836	1	.000	2.912	3.211

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The study examined the conflict resolution approaches used to restore peace on campus. The result for ordinal logistic regression test revealed that competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating were the resolution approaches used by the school management to restore peace on campus (Estimate = 0.701, 0.982, 0.512, 0.389 for competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating respectively; $p = 0.004$, 0.000 , 0.011 , $0.021 < 0.05$). Therefore, the alternate hypothesis was accepted, and the null rejected. Hotebo, Asokere, Abdul-Azeez & Ajemunigbohum [13] affirm that conflicts are part of human nature and that the prevailing means of managing it among people in the service sector in Nigeria include: bargaining, collaboration and avoidance conflict management styles.

The study also determined the effectiveness level of mixed approach utilisation in the resolution of conflict. The result revealed that utilisation of mixed approach as a conflict resolution strategy had a positive and significant effect on effectiveness (Estimate = 2.437, $p = 0.007 < 0.05$). Thus, the alternate hypothesis was accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected. Adeyemi & Ademilua [17] established that using mix management strategies (multifaceted) in managing conflicts in tertiary institutions enhance administrative effectiveness. Finally, the study evaluated the extent to which the panel/committee report recommendations were implemented on campus. The result revealed that the panel/committee report recommendations (win-win approach involving collaborating and accommodating strategies) were significantly implemented (Estimate = 2.912, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Hence, the alternate hypothesis which states that the panel/committee report recommendations were significantly implemented was accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

This study about the university of Nigeria conflict experience with respect to the 2016 student riot in the Enugu Campus of the university was tackled via multifaceted strategy. The parties to the conflict which attracted many people because of the interrelatedness of the university system units. The ad-hoc committee set up by the university authority was given six terms of references.

In terms of responsibilities, some related units in the university were blamed. For instance, the Works department was blamed for poor services and its poor interface with the public power supply agency. The committee also indicted the security department of the university for

ineffective communication and dereliction of duties as well as breach of the university due process in communication. The committee recommended overhauling the security apparatus of the university. The student affairs department got its share of the blame as its Dean was out of the country; though the deputising officer of the Dean had warned students' union government that there is a thin line demarcating a peaceful protest from a violent one. The Deputy Vice Chancellor's office could not be appropriately briefed by the security unit during the time of the problem, though he had held series of meetings with electricity distribution company (EEDC), and top campus functionaries in order to arrest the situation.

Aside from these, the committee recommended the immediate restoration of electricity to the University Community. In response, the University management procured and installed two new generators for the provision of electric power, thereby meeting the demands of the students. The multifaceted strategy involved collaborating, compromising, competing and accommodating in terms of activities of reaching out to all parties concerned.

Compromising was employed while looking at the issues within the ambit of human ability in terms of how much was paid by students for reparation and the eventual undertaking. The accommodating strategy made sure the committee did not spare anyone whose role fell short of the norm in the entire saga. They recommended reparation fee for the students and an undertaking pledging allegiance to non- violence activities in the future. This multifaceted strategy balanced the equation of conflict and restored everybody to a more sustainable position.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study examined the management of conflicts in universities, using the university of Nigeria experience in 2016. It identified the management approaches employed to resolve the crisis to include competing, collaborating, compromising and accommodating. It showed that the multifaceted approach adopted by the University management was useful in restoration and sustenance of peace in the institution. It, therefore, recommends' its replication for resolving such conflicts elsewhere.

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